‘I Can’t Tell You’: Attorneys, Relatives Struggle to Find Hospitalized ICE Detainees

As ICE arrests and detentions have climbed, so too have reports of people taken to hospitals by immigration agents because of illness or injury.

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Lydia Romero strained to hear her husband’s feeble voice through the phone.

A week earlier, immigration agents had grabbed Julio César Peña from his front yard in Glendale, California. Now, he was in a hospital after suffering a ministroke. He was shackled to the bed by his hand and foot, he told Romero, and agents were in the room, listening to the call. He was scared he would die and wanted his wife there.

“What hospital are you at?” Romero asked.

“I can’t tell you,” he replied.

Viridiana Chabolla, Peña’s attorney, couldn’t get an answer to that question, either. Peña’s deportation officer and the medical contractor at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center refused to tell her. Exasperated, she tried calling a nearby hospital, Providence St. Mary Medical Center.

“They said even if they had a person in ICE custody under their care, they wouldn’t be able to confirm whether he’s there or not, that only ICE can give me the information,” Chabolla said. The hospital confirmed this policy to KFF Health News.

Family members and attorneys for patients hospitalized after being detained by federal immigration officials said they are facing extreme difficulty trying to locate patients, get information about their well-being, and provide them emotional and legal support. They say many hospitals refuse to provide information or allow contact with these patients. Instead, hospitals allow immigration officers to call the shots on how much — if any — contact is allowed, which can deprive patients of their constitutional right to seek legal advice and leave them vulnerable to abuse, attorneys said.

Hospitals say they are trying to protect the safety and privacy of patients, staff, and law

enforcement officials, even while hospital employees in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Portland, Ore., cities where Immigration and Customs Enforcement has conducted immigration raids, say it's made their jobs difficult. Hospitals have used what are sometimes called blackout procedures, which can include registering a patient under a pseudonym, removing their name from the hospital directory, or prohibiting staff from even confirming that a patient is in the hospital.

"We've heard incidences of this blackout process being used at multiple hospitals across the state, and it's very concerning," said Shiu-Ming Cheer, the deputy director of immigrant and racial justice at the California Immigrant Policy Center, an advocacy group.

Some Democratic-led states, including California, Colorado, and Maryland, have enacted legislation that seeks to protect patients from immigration enforcement in hospitals. However, those policies do not address protections for people already in ICE custody.

More Detainees Hospitalized

Peña is among more than 350,000 people arrested by federal immigration authorities since President Donald Trump returned to the White House. As arrests and detentions have climbed, so too have reports of people taken to hospitals by immigration agents because of illness or injury — due to preexisting conditions or problems stemming from their arrest or detention.

ICE has faced criticism for using aggressive and deadly tactics, as well as for reports of mistreatment and inadequate medical care at its facilities. Sen. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) told reporters at a January 20 news conference outside a detention center he visited in California City that he spoke to a diabetic woman held there who had not received treatment in two months.

While there are no publicly available statistics on the number of people sick or injured in ICE detention, the agency's news releases point to 32 people who died in immigration custody in 2025. Six more have died this year.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, did not respond to a request for information about its policies or Peña's case.

According to ICE's guidelines, people in custody should be given access to a telephone, visits from family and friends, and private consultation with legal counsel. The agency can make administrative decisions, including about visitation, when a patient is in the hospital, but should defer to hospital policies on contacting next of kin when a patient is seriously ill, the guidelines state.

Asked in detail about hospital practices related to patients in immigration custody and whether there are best practices that hospitals should follow, Ben Teicher, a spokesperson for the American Hospital Association, declined to comment.

David Simon, a spokesperson for the California Hospital Association, said that "there are times when hospitals will — at the request of law enforcement — maintain confidentiality of patients'

names and other identifying characteristics."

Although policies vary, members of the public can typically call a hospital and ask for a patient by name to find out whether they're there, and often be transferred to the patient's room, said William Weber, an emergency physician in Minneapolis and medical director for the Medical Justice Alliance, which advocates for the medical needs of people in law enforcement custody. Family members and others authorized by the patient can visit. And medical staff routinely call relatives to let them know a loved one is in the hospital, or to ask for information that could help with their care.

But when a patient is in law enforcement custody, hospitals frequently agree to restrict this kind of information sharing and access, Weber said. The rationale is that these measures prevent unauthorized outsiders from threatening the patient or law enforcement personnel, given that hospitals lack the security infrastructure of a prison or detention center. High-profile patients such as celebrities sometimes also request this type of protection.

Several attorneys and health care providers questioned the need for such restrictions. Immigration detention is civil, not criminal, detention. The Trump administration says it's focused on arresting and deporting criminals, yet most of those arrested have no criminal conviction, according to data compiled by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse and several news outlets.

Taken Outside His Home

According to Peña's wife, Romero, he has no criminal record. Peña came to the United States from Mexico in sixth grade and has an adult son in the U.S. military. The 43-year-old has terminal kidney disease and survived a heart attack in November. He has trouble walking and is partially blind, his wife said. He was detained December 8 while resting outside after coming home from dialysis treatment.

Initially, Romero was able to find her husband through the ICE Online Detainee Locator System. She visited him at a temporary holding facility in downtown Los Angeles, bringing him his medicines and a sweater. She then saw he'd been moved to the Adelanto detention center. But the locator did not show where he was after he was hospitalized.

When she and other relatives drove to the detention facility to find him, they were turned away, she said. Romero received occasional calls from her husband in the hospital but said they were less than 10 minutes long and took place under ICE surveillance. She wanted to know where he was so she could be at the hospital to hold his hand, make sure he was well cared for, and encourage him to stay strong, she said.

Shackling him and preventing him from seeing his family was unfair and unnecessary, she said.

"He's weak," Romero said. "It's not like he's going to run away."

ICE guidelines say contact and visits from family and friends should be allowed "within security

and operational constraints." Detainees have a constitutional right to speak confidentially with an attorney. Weber said immigration authorities should tell attorneys where their clients are and allow them to talk in person or use an unmonitored phone line.

Hospitals, though, fall into a gray area on enforcing these rights, since they are primarily focused on treating medical needs, Weber said. Still, he added, hospitals should ensure their policies align with the law.

Family Denied Access

Numerous immigration attorneys have spent weeks trying to locate clients detained by ICE, with their efforts sometimes thwarted by hospitals.

Nicolas Thompson-Lleras, a Los Angeles attorney who counsels immigrants facing deportation, said two of his clients were registered under aliases at different hospitals in Los Angeles County last year. Initially, the hospitals denied the clients were there and refused to let Thompson-Lleras meet with them, he said. Family members were also denied access, he said.

One of his clients was Bayron Rovidio Marin, a car wash worker injured during a raid in August. Immigration agents surveilled him for over a month at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, a county-run facility, without charging him.

In November, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to curb the use of blackout policies for patients under civil immigration custody at county-run hospitals. In a statement, Arun Patel, the chief patient safety and clinical risk management officer for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, said the policies are designed to reduce safety risks for patients, doctors, nurses, and custody officers.

"In some situations, there may be concerns about threats to the patient, attempts to interfere with medical care, unauthorized visitors, or the introduction of contraband," Patel said. "Our goal is not to restrict care but to allow care to happen safely and without disruption."

Leaving Patients Vulnerable

Thompson-Lleras said he's concerned that hospitals are cooperating with federal immigration authorities at the expense of patients and their families and leaving patients vulnerable to abuse.

"It allows people to be treated suboptimally," Thompson-Lleras said. "It allows people to be treated on abbreviated timelines, without supervision, without family intervention or advocacy. These people are alone, disoriented, being interrogated, at least in Bayron's case, under pain and influence of medication."

Such incidents are alarming to hospital workers. In Los Angeles, two health care professionals who asked not to be identified by KFF Health News, out of concern for their livelihoods, said that ICE and hospital administrators, at public and private hospitals, frequently block staff from contacting

family members for people in custody, even to find out about their health conditions or what medications they're on. That violates medical ethics, they said.

Blackout procedures are another concern.

"They help facilitate, whether intentionally or not, the disappearance of patients," said one worker, a physician for the county's Department of Health Services and part of a coalition of concerned health workers from across the region.

At Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland, nurses publicly expressed outrage over what they saw as hospital cooperation with ICE and the flouting of patient rights. Legacy Health has sent a cease and desist letter to the nurses' union, accusing it of making "false or misleading statements."

"I was really disgusted," said Blaire Glennon, a nurse who quit her job at the hospital in December. She said numerous patients were brought to the hospital by ICE with serious injuries they sustained while being detained. "I felt like Legacy was doing massive human rights violations."

Handcuffed While Unconscious

Two days before Christmas, Chabolla, Peña's attorney, received a call from ICE with the answer she and Romero had been waiting for. Peña was at Victor Valley Global Medical Center, about 10 miles from Adelanto, and about to be released.

Excited, Romero and her family made the two-hour-plus drive from Glendale to the hospital to take him home.

When they got there, they found Peña intubated and unconscious, his arm and leg still handcuffed to the hospital bed. He'd had a severe seizure on December 20, but no one had told his family or legal team, his attorney said.

Tim Lineberger, a spokesperson for Victor Valley Global Medical Center's parent company, KPC Health, said he could not comment on specific patient cases, because of privacy protections. He said the hospital's policies on patient information disclosure comply with state and federal law.

Peña was finally cleared to go home on January 5. No court date has been set, and his family is filing a petition to adjust his legal status based on his son's military service. For now, he still faces deportation proceedings.

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